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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 001022

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TAGS: PGOV SOCI PREL PHUM KIRF CH

SUBJECT: TIBET: RESTORING ORDER IS PRC'S PRIMARY FOCUS;
LEADERSHIP FEARS SPREADING UNREST, SCHOLAR SAYS

REF: A. BEIJING 998

- 1B. BEIJING 982
1C. BEIJING 999 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson.
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: China's leadership is focused on restoring order and preventing the Tibet-related unrest of the last week from spreading nationwide, a well-connected scholar told PolOff March 18. Although international reaction to Beijing's response is a consideration for China's rulers, particularly in the run-up to the Olympics, ensuring social stability is "by far more important." Some Chinese observers are drawing parallels between current social instability and the situation in 1989, this contact stated, asserting that today's tensions are "far more serious." "Everyone" in China wants to take advantage of the Olympic Games to highlight their grievances, he argued. For that reason, the Government intends to move "swiftly" to quell the unrest and ensure it does not spread further. In doing so, China will "not be excessive" and will adopt more "moderate" policies than it did when last faced with Tibetan unrest on this scale, in 1989. End Summary.

Focus on Restoring Order

12. (C) The ongoing unrest in Tibetan areas of China remains a hot topic of conversation among the Embassy's Chinese contacts, as scholars and journalists discuss, in private, how to respond to the protests, their possible impact on the August Olympic Games and whether the unrest has broader implications for social stability nationwide (refs A and B). According to Cao Huayin (strictly protect), Deputy Secretary General at the China Reform Forum (CRF), a think tank affiliated with the Communist Party's Central Party School, China's leadership is concerned first and foremost with restoring order in Tibetan areas so as to prevent unrest there from spreading. Although China cares about its international image and worries about a possible negative impact on the Olympics, that is not the focus, Cao told PolOff on March 18, arguing that ensuring social stability is "far more important." For Beijing, quelling the unrest has become a "law enforcement issue," Cao asserted, stating that those responsible for the looting and killing of "innocents" in Lhasa late last week must be "brought to justice."

Fear of Instability

13. (C) The leadership fears that, if it does not quickly get the current unrest under control, disorder could spread to other areas, Cao asserted. If the unrest spreads, it likely

will not be limited just to ethnic minority areas but could involve Han Chinese, especially the poor and disadvantaged in China's rural areas. "Everyone" wants to take advantage of the Olympics to air their grievances, Cao claimed. Some observers are even drawing parallels between the current unrest and the demonstrations in 1989 that culminated in the Tiananmen Square protests. (Note: Cao's CRF colleague, Dai Fengning (strictly protect), said he "fully agreed" with Cao's analysis, noting that he too had "heard" others making this link.) In 1989, unrest also "started" in Tibet, Cao stated. Moreover, social tensions are "far more serious" today than they were back then. Twenty years ago, people were angered primarily by corruption. Today, there are "many more reasons" for people to be unhappy, including corruption, but also the rich-poor gap and anger over various other "injustices." There is an economic and social component to the current unrest in Tibet, Cao observed, but tensions there are obviously exacerbated by ethnic and religious factors. Nonetheless, it is "not difficult to imagine" unrest occurring in majority Han Chinese areas, Cao said.

Response will be "Swift," but "Moderate"

¶4. (C) To nip this potential unrest in the bud, the center will move "swiftly" to restore order, Cao predicted. Nevertheless, President Hu Jintao "learned a lesson" from 1989 (when he was Party Secretary in Tibet and responsible for the crackdown on dissent there) and will be "moderate" this time around. "We have principles," Cao said, claiming that the Central leadership, to his knowledge, has not authorized the use of deadly force and arguing that Chinese security forces have so far shown "great restraint," which is why so many of them were injured by protesters in last week's Lhasa riots. Although some in the West say President Hu

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Jintao now has a "second opportunity" to crack down on Tibet, Cao said this time around, President Hu is advocating a more moderate response, having learned that an overly hard-line approach will not solve the problem in the long-term and will also invite severe international criticism.

Pondering Long-Term Solutions

¶5. (C) Later in the conversation, Cao conceded that the Tibetan situation is more complex than a mere "law enforcement problem," confessing that his views on the current situation are based partly on the spin presented by Chinese official media. When PolOff pointed out the long-term historical reasons for Tibetan resentment, Cao said he agreed that the Party should address these long-term problems, but only after the current protests end. Cao hoped the Dalai Lama would call for restraint on the part of Tibetan demonstrators, though he wondered aloud whether the Dalai Lama can actually control the "Tibetan youth" that appear to have led many of the protests.

Assessing the U.S. Position

¶6. (C) The U.S. response to the unrest has been "so far, so good," Cao said, who appeared familiar with U.S. calls for restraint while also urging the Chinese Government to show respect for Tibetan culture and engage in dialogue with the Dalai Lama. Cao thought it "unlikely" that significant anti-American action would result from the unrest, though he warned that, if Washington were to lead, or support, calls for efforts to "penalize" China, to possibly include an Olympic boycott, then public "anger" with the United States would likely "grow quickly."

Comment

¶7. (C) Cao's reference to 1989 and worries about the possibility of unrest spreading to ethnic Han areas are diametrically opposed to those of another well-connected contact, who told us March 17 that the current unrest would not spread beyond ethnic minority areas (ref A).
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